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ABSTRACT

A discussion is provided of the distinguishing characteristics of developmental education. First, the reasons for the lack of a clear definition are discussed, and the consequences of this ambiguity are highlighted in terms of the existing confusion over the purposes of developmental education. Next, the linguistic and theoretical bases of developmental education are explored, with particular emphasis on the two major supporting concepts of developmental age and sequential learning. The following section looks at the definitive features of developmental education within postsecondary education, including: (1) institutional and state policies toward the granting of college credit for developmental courses; (2) the characteristics of the two types of developmental students; i.e., the slow learner and the inadequately prepared student; (3) the goals related to content mastery and personal development that have grown from the need and desire to serve this group of students; (4) the special instructional techniques and curricular features that have been applied to achieve program goals; and (5) the special qualities of developmental educators. (HB)

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Developmental Education: A Definition

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Developmental Education: A Definition

Developmental education is common enough in higher education that practically all who work in that sphere, and a great many who do not, can define it--to their own satisfaction. Amidst these definitions, however, exists little consensus. The lack of consensus of a good, clear working definition of developmental education is odd for many reasons, but especially in light of the number of students involved in developmental education activities. In fact, in one way or another developmental educators "deal with over half of all students entering our institutions" (Miles, 1984, p. 9).

The lack of definition also cannot be credited to the newness of developmental education; developmental education in higher education hardly represents a recent trend. Developmental education in one form or another has occupied a distinct niche in American higher education for well over a century. In an historical view of what he terms the "academic preparation gap," Brier (1984) points out that the "popular belief that the academically underprepared student and developmental education efforts are by-products of the open admissions of the 1960s is no

more than a widely believed myth"; "bridging the academic preparation gap has been a constant in the history of American higher education" (p. 2).

The many labels used to describe developmental-type programs give evidence of the lack of definition. A partial list of labels includes "foundation" programs, "remedial" programs, "developmental studies" programs, and, in slang, "bonehead" programs. Not content to restrict developmental activities to the scope of a "program" level, Chickering (1981) adds to the list of labels when he elevates developmental activities to the stature of a full-blown movement, what he calls the "human potential movement" (p. xix).

Although not as important as the actual lack of consistency among labels describing developmental education, but still of interest, are the reasons given to account for this inconsistency. For example, Brier suggests that the abundance of developmental education labels results from a desire among institutions to disguise the fact that they engage in educational activities at the pre-college level (p. 3). Such camouflaging functions to offer developmental programs protection from Boards of Trustees who believe pre-college activities on campus have demeaning effects

on their institutions. The abundance of labels might also stem from the "very different educational heritages of developmental educators: mathematics, reading, writing, literature, counseling, elementary education, administration, tutoring, and so forth" (Miles, p. 6). Indeed, diverse labels stem to some degree from what Royer (1983) calls "a theoretical vacuum surrounding the issue of how cognitive growth and change occur" (p. 206).

Regardless of why this abundance of labels exists, their number and variety contribute to the problem of arriving at an accurate consistent definition of developmental education, without which other problems arise. For example, Shaw and Townsend (cited in Witty, Freeland, & Grotberg, 1966) note the frustration that results from "the misunderstanding that developmental educating is the same as 'remedial' help" (p. 266). Of greater importance is what happens when, because of a lack of definition, educational words become no more than "empty slogans . . . or even worse, they provide the license for doing anything under the protective blanket of their impressive names" (Soltis, 1978, p. 90). The lack of a clear and common definition of developmental education and the problems this lack spawns provide the basis for this analysis. The

importance of developmental education requires that it be accurately defined and that the "fuzzy thinking" that accompanies the lack of definition be eliminated, thus forcing what is otherwise an abstract and vague concept into a concrete and more meaningful context (Soltis, p. 88).

Although this analysis and definition of developmental education places primary emphasis on the institutional features of developmental education, sufficient definition requires that some attention also be directed to the linguistic basis of the concept. The linguistic analysis, in turn, begins with an examination of the root of the term--development. The OED defines development as a "gradual unfolding" and "bring[ing] into fuller view . . . from a latent or elementary condition" (p. 280). This image of unfolding is echoed and amplified by Breckenridge and Vincent (cited in Witty, Freeland, & Grotberg, p. 60) who say, "Development can be defined as the emerging and expanding of capacities of the individual." Of particular significance in both of these definitions is the idea that development implies the unfolding and expansion of something already partially developed; partial development, therefore, excludes activities labeled "remedial" and facilitates an early distinction

between these two terms so often used interchangeably. "Developmental" does not equal "remedial." "'Remedial,'" Clowes (cited in Piland & Pierce, 1984, p. 16) points out, "attempts to help students learn something which was not previously learned or which had been forgotten." "Developmental," on the other hand, works to expand something already acquired.

A look at the theoretical bases of developmental education also helps define it. Developmental education finds its roots in the developmental theories of Piaget, Kolberg, and Dewey (American Education Encyclopedia, p. 159), and adequate comprehension of developmental education relies upon an understanding of the two major concepts supporting developmental theories--the concept of developmental age and the concept of sequential learning. The first, developmental age, equates a person's physical and cognitive development to his chronological age. In other words, within the theoretical construct of human development, normal development is judged by a person's ability to perform certain "developmental tasks" of both a physical and cognitive nature at prescribed ages (Havighurst, 1972, p. 2). Ability to perform these tasks at their prescribed chronological age assignments indicates normal development or readiness for the

skills being assessed. On the other hand, an inability to perform them at their prescribed times indicates developmental retardation in the assessed skill areas.

At the center of this concept of developmental age lies the crucial theory that persons develop at different rates. That is, when one individual reaches his "teachable moment"--when "the body is ripe . . . and the self is ready to achieve a certain task"--another might not (Havighurst, p. 7). This theory explains to a great extent why in a class of students of a similar age some students easily grasp a concept while others do not. Indeed, developmental education in higher education serves late bloomers who have not mastered concepts adequately on the first go around, who were not ripe at the usual harvest time.

The second principal concept underlying developmental theories, sequential learning, suggests that learning occurs in progressive sequential stages. The learning of one task enables a person to grasp subsequent tasks, thus allowing him to build on what he has mastered before and to advance to higher more sophisticated levels. In this progressive sequential learning process, emphasis rests on mastering concepts in succession. One task cannot be adequately and sufficiently mastered until its prerequisite tasks have

been. Attempts to master concepts without the mastery of foundational concepts prove considerably difficult or impossible. Havighurst offers a good example of the sequential dependence of developmental tasks. He notes that if a person does not learn to talk when he is two or three years old, "the failure will stand in the way of learning a series of later tasks which depend greatly upon language" (pp. 4 & 5).

At this stage in the definition of developmental education, the direction of the discussion shifts. So far, definition has focused upon the linguistic and theoretical bases of developmental education. Next attention turns to the institutional aspects of developmental education, toward providing a complementary empirical understanding of the term. In other words, further clarification of the term comes from studying and cataloging the features of developmental education as it exists, and particularly as it exists within the realm of higher education. The rest of the analysis consequently focuses on the features necessary to classify an educational program "developmental" within an institution of higher education.

A few of the definitive features of developmental education in higher education are commonly recognized

and require little or no explanation. For example, credits earned for completion of developmental courses are typically considered nontransferrable elective credits. Although students taking developmental coursework at colleges and universities receive credit hours for successful completion of these courses, these credits do not fulfill degree requirements and do not transfer to other institutions of higher education. Most developmental courses, furthermore, represent three subject areas: English, reading, and math. In many institutions developmental courses include other subject areas (chemistry, biology, and study skills) to help "bridge the academic preparation gap" (Brier, p. 2) between secondary and college-level coursework. The last of the commonly recognized features of developmental education refers to funding. The funding formulas for developmental coursework vary from state to state. As a rule, however, developmental coursework receives either less funding than other courses offered at colleges and universities or, in the worst cases, no outside funding at all.

The particulars of other definitive institutional features of developmental education prove less familiar to persons outside of developmental programs, but they represent necessary pieces of the total definitional

puzzle. In fact, at the day-to-day operational level, they rate well above all other features discussed thus far. These other institutional features include the specific population developmental education serves (developmental students), the goals which have grown from the need and desire to serve this population, instructional and curricular features applied toward meeting these goals, and the qualities of developmental educators who make developmental education work.

An analysis of these other institutional features of developmental education must appropriately first deal with developmental students; and justification of this statement follows. Most curricula within institutions of higher education emanate from the requirements of degree or occupational goals. Courses are offered to satisfy degree requirements or to provide necessary occupational skills. Most college-level courses, therefore, exist to meet the needs of academia or society. Developmental courses, conversely, do not exist to serve, at least directly, institutions or society. Rather, they exist specifically to serve students. Moreover, although critics may point out that all philosophical and mission statements of institutions of higher education claim to serve students, few programs within these

institutions focus so ardently on them as does developmental education.

Who are developmental students? Administrators tend to place them in a catch-all category labeled "high risk," which illuminates these administrators' concern for student attrition because of failure. "High risk," however, falls much short of describing the reasons for failure or the definitive features of developmental students. Evans and Dubois (1972) approach a more accurate description of them. Developmental students, they explain, display an "observable gap between demonstrated ability and estimated potential" (p. 43). Furthermore, students targeted for developmental education represent two types of underachievers: the slow learner and the inadequately prepared.

The first type of developmental student, the slow learner, displays retarded development because of limited intellectual potential. At any specified age and grade level the rate at which he masters developmental tasks is slower than that of other individuals of the same chronological age. For the slow learner, developmental retardation reflects in his inability to master many developmental tasks. Johnson (cited in Evans & Dubois) notes the range of the

effects of retarded intellectual development: "Due to retarded learning ability, adjustment problems, grasp of academic instruction, and so forth, are all affected directly or indirectly" (p. 41). When tested for academic performance, the slow learner shows general retardation in all areas as opposed to deficiencies in particular areas of content or skills. Maxwell (cited in Evans & Dubois) alludes to the effects of retarded development in areas other than academic: These students are likely to "lack a clear system of goals and values, be vulnerable to disparagement by others, lack insight into their problem, and be anxious and depressed" (p. 43). Developmental education programs strive to provide slow learners help to make gradual progress in skills shown through diagnostic assessment to require development. The special characteristics of slow learners mandate long-term developmental instructional approaches. That is, slow learners do not respond effectively to short-term intensive courses (Evans and Dubois, p. 43).

The second type of underachiever targeted for developmental education programs, the inadequately prepared student, differs distinctly from the slow learner. Unlike the slow learner, he has no significant intellectual deficiencies. Rather, his

developmental retardation stems from "inadequate or inappropriate environmental and educational experiences" (Evans and Dubois, p. 41). For any number of reasons, he has not experienced the stimulation to develop cognitively and psychologically.

An awareness of the characteristics that define developmental students helps to prevent confusing them with remedial students. They are categorically distinct. Furthermore, recognizing the differences between developmental students and remedial students provides much insight into the differences between developmental education and remedial education. Students served by remedial education programs differ from developmental students in several ways. First, unlike developmental students whose intellectual growth has been retarded because of slow cognitive maturation or the lack of environmental and educational stimulation, many remedial students are intellectually retarded because of learning disabilities. Developmental education does not respond to the needs of students with learning disabilities, while remedial education does. Second, developmental education delegates to remedial education the responsibility of serving the needs of students with neurological or severe psychological difficulties. In other words, if

retardation is accounted to neurological or psychological factors, it must be "corrected" by remediation, not by development. Third, remedial students require intense doses of one-on-one instruction; remediation in the sense of "corrective" or "curative" occurs "outside the framework of the total group teaching situation" (Zintz, cited in American Education Encyclopedia, p. 440). Although developmental education programs rely heavily upon individualization of instruction, the much greater degree of individualized treatment distinguishes remedial education from developmental education. In summary, therefore, remedial education differs from developmental education in the types of problems from which students suffer and the degree of individualization required to meet these problems.

Having identified the student population targeted for developmental education, identifying the goals of developmental education becomes a comparatively simple matter: Developmental students' needs dictate developmental education's goals. A clear understanding of these goals, moreover, helps further to approach the central objective of this analysis, to sufficiently define developmental education. Like the developmental students, the goals of developmental education fit into

two categories: content-mastery goals and personal development goals. In the former category, developmental education functions to upgrade students to college level or, in Brier's words again, to "bridge the academic preparation gap" (p. 2). The content-mastery goals of developmental education focus on raising the academic competence of developmentally handicapped students.

The latter category, personal development goals, concentrates not on what the student learns, but rather on how the person expands and emerges as a whole person. In this sense, the personal development goals of developmental education reflect and respond to Sanford's opinion of the chief goal of all higher education (cited in Chickering). Sanford asserts that "development of the student as a person is the central aim of education and . . . all the resources of our colleges should be put into the service of that aim" (p. xvii). The personal development goals of developmental education abide in this philosophical realm.

Attainment of the personal development goals of developmental education relates directly to the ability of developmental students to succeed at their assigned tasks. Havighurst explains the importance of success

to the overall scheme of the developmental process: Success with developmental tasks, he says, is directly linked to the student's happiness and to success with later tasks, "while failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval by the society, and difficulty with later tasks" (p. 2). With success, moreover, comes a desired movement on the student's part from dependence to independence (Beilin, cited in Winston, 1984, p. 90), and as the developmental student gains independence, he functions more successfully in the mainstream college curricula (Clowes, 1984).

Two additional, very broad goals of developmental education encompass content-mastery and personal development goals. The first states in a straightforward comprehensive manner that developmental education strives to serve students whose needs are not being met by the system (Miles, p.9). The second broad encompassing goal of developmental education mirrors one goal stated in the written philosophical statement of the University of Houston Downtown College. Like this institution, developmental education has as its goal to fulfill human potential, in the sense that "valuable contributions to a dynamic society result from the fulfillment of human potential" (cited in Pepper, 1978, p. 12).

The goals of developmental education provide the framework for the developmental curriculum, and thus the process of defining developmental education turns next to an examination of the distinctive features of this curriculum. Moreover, the distinct features of the developmental curriculum are best illustrated by contrasting it with other college curricula. For example, the greater complexity of the developmental curriculum becomes clear when it is contrasted to mainstream college curricula. Unlike mainstream curricula principally concerned with imparting knowledge to students in an efficient and for the most part impersonal manner, the developmental curriculum must constantly address both the curricular and noncurricular aspects of the person's development in an individually tailored and highly personal manner. Whereas mainstream curricula place effectively total emphasis upon content mastery, the developmental curriculum seeks a balance of emphasis between content mastery and personal development. As Winston explains, within the developmental curriculum, content mastery and personal development share equal importance, and the success of one relates directly to the success of the other: "How the student functions in academic arenas is closely related to how that student has felt,

what that student has experienced, and how the student has developed in non academic arenas" (p. 90). In other words, the developmental curriculum concerns itself with the whole person in attempt to "maximize the social, psychological, and educational experiences" of the person (Am. Ed. Ency., p. 501).

While the developmental curriculum stands uniquely distinct among curricula, and while a separate identity can work to the good of developmental programs, measures must be taken to prevent this separateness of identity from isolating the developmental curriculum from other curricula within an institution. Unfortunately, this often occurs (Miles, p. 6). Curriculum designers, administrators, and faculty must remain aware that successful developmental education efforts hinge upon integration of the developmental curriculum with other curricula. In the curricular machine of a college or university, the developmental curriculum represents a cog whose teeth must mesh with other cogs in the machine and whose design both drives and is driven by the mainstream curriculum. To operate efficiently and effectively, developmental activities within an institution require the support and cooperation of the entire institutional staff (Witty, Freeland, & Grotberg, p. 10).

In order to fulfill the goals of the developmental education program, the developmental curriculum makes extensive use of special instructional techniques. These techniques are inherent in the developmental curriculum and further help to sufficiently define developmental education. Other instructional programs in higher education may employ these techniques, but greater reliance and emphasis on these techniques set developmental education apart from these other programs.

Among these techniques, individualization of instruction ranks among the most important. Accordingly, the number of students in developmental classes is kept low to maintain a low student-teacher ratio and, thus, to encourage and enhance interaction between individual students and the developmental teacher. Outside of the classroom, the developmental curriculum incorporates individualized instructional techniques like tutoring and programmed instruction to supplement what the student experiences in the classroom and to respond to his particular needs. Developmental programs also emphasize individualized treatment to accommodate for varying learning paces and to provide, when required, flexible amounts of time for students to complete courses or to recycle (Pepper, p.

13). Few other programs in higher education rely more heavily on individualized instruction.

Evaluation represents another distinctive feature of developmental education. In order to monitor the progress of individual students, developmental educators must evaluate students thoroughly. Continuous and frequent evaluation functions not only to track and adjust individual progress but also functions to keep those involved in the instructional process constantly aware of the unique characteristics and needs of each student. Indeed, evaluation occurs to determine each student's "teachable moment" (Havighurst, p. 27) when he is biologically, psychologically, and culturally ready to master any certain task. This teachable moment arrives when the student's nervous system and brain are mature and when he has the ability to work with the mastery of concepts, or, as William James (cited in Havighurst) put it, "to breath fully in the upper conceptual air" (p. 27). Continuous and frequent evaluation enables developmental educators to determine this teachable moment.

Sufficient definition of developmental education must also include an examination of developmental educators and the characteristics that distinguish them

from other educators. Placing a discussion of the distinguishing characteristics of developmental educators at this late stage in the analysis in no way indicates a lack of significance of the developmental educator's role. In fact, with the one exception of the developmental student, the developmental educator ranks at the top on the scale of importance within the scheme of developmental education. Only, the logical arrangement of ideas dictated discussion of the teacher at this point.

The developmental educator does stand apart from other faculty, and his separate identity begins with his attitude toward teaching. Goldenberger (cited in Paternite, 1983) states that many college faculty, particularly those teaching large classes, exemplify the prevailing attitude "that their job is to profess; it is up to the student to listen and learn" (p. 60). Although many regular faculty do take an interest in their students, the developmental educator must take a "personal stake" (Miles, p. 6) in each student's outcome, accepting his role as a bridge for the student "linking the old self with the new" (Perry, cited in Patenite, p. 64). He accepts the many challenges presented him with a "strong sense of zeal and commitment" (Miles, p. 6), and counter to the

impersonal mood created by the typical, listen-and-learn lecture format of the regular college classroom, the developmental teacher emphasizes the creation of a warm classroom atmosphere. He recognizes that personalism acts as a support to the development of the individual student and that it promotes the necessary high degree of trust between developmental students and their teachers.

The developmental educator is also distinct from other postsecondary educators in both the variety of instructional tools he uses and the scope of content area expertise upon which he draws. As mentioned above, college and university faculty in the mainstream curricula rely most heavily on lecture as a means of teaching. The developmental educator, on the other hand, must tote with him a traveling hardware salesman's variety of instructional methods in a suitcase decorated with the decals of many subject areas. Indeed, he must play the role of what Miles (p. 7) descriptively calls an educational "Jack-of-all-trades," who goes about his duties with the knowledge that what works with one student "almost certainly will not work with the next." These "last bastion[s] of the postsecondary education generalist," Miles continues, must be "home-grown instructional

developers, counselors, cross-trained teachers, testers, tutors, computer managers, administrators, and researchers all at the same time."

These features when combined distinguish developmental educators from other educators on campus. Similarly, the compilation of the more comprehensive historical, theoretical, and institutional features of developmental education presented over the course of this analysis distinguish developmental education from other programs in higher education. Although none of the features alone sufficiently distinguishes and defines developmental education, their composite does. Moreover, with a distinct identity and definition will come the benefits that Soltis says come generally "with a functional grasp of the language of education": This grasp permits educators to "more fully understand the educational situation, more easily diagnose student's problems, more adequately plan effective teaching strategies, and more efficiently evaluate successes and failures" (Soltis, p. 90). Through precise definition, developmental education stands much to gain.

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